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## Labour, The Way We Work

Commentary

Melanie Dodd

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# Labour, The Way We Work

## Commentary

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**Melanie Dodd**

### *Abstract*

Exposure to inequality and precarity is now so pervasive that in the darkest of ways, it appears to have provoked an appetite for change in a new generation of young architects. Providing a forum in which to discuss the forces shaping our unequal built environment, the *Labour* Symposium at Central Saint Martins hosted by Spatial Practices in March 2018, turned its gaze toward the profession of architecture, critically investigating architecture and the building industry through ‘the way we work’. As neo-liberalizing, market fundamentalist agendas have taken hold of our contemporary cities, the steady commodification of our urban and social fabric extends into our daily lives, revealed in the way in which architectural and construction labour is affected through deregularization and liberalization. Reporting on the contributions to the Symposium, this article showcases a series of collective platforms agitating for change, representing an apparent upsurge in actions toward the reconstruction of our profession.

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London's accelerating levels of inequality are now infamous. This pernicious trend has been well documented but is now tangibly *experienced* across a broader sector of society than ever before. A recent Intergenerational Commission Report, for example, reveals that one in three millennials in the UK will never own a home. Exposure to inequality and precarity is so pervasive that in the darkest of ways, it appears to have provoked an appetite for change in a new generation of young architects, for whom personal and professional experiences overlap uncomfortably. Increasingly as a consequence, there is a growing appetite amongst architects to look unflinchingly at the mechanics of inequality across their work, study, and personal lives, and to find ways to address it. Responding to this appetite, the 'Fundamentals' Debate Series – hosted at Central Saint Martins with Oliver Wainwright, the Guardian's Architecture Critic – has been delving beneath the surface of architecture, providing a forum in which to discuss the forces shaping our unequal built environment including structures of planning, funding streams, and economies of property development – the real forces that drive the architectural objects we find emerging on the streets of our cities. In the initial series, the contributors were economists, planners, developers and consultants; people who operate in the wider context but are often absent from the myopic world of architectural debate and reportage. Against the backdrop of startling inequity in London, the fundamental forces of planning, land, housing and industry, unpacked by the contributors, exposed an 'effect' far greater than that the architectural object could have. Continuing to ask difficult questions, the most recent series turned its gaze inward upon the profession of architecture, critically investigating architecture and the building industry through 'the way we work'. Shining a spotlight on training, employment, working practice, and procurement within the architectural industry, three debates – 'Learn', 'Work', and 'Build' – cast an interrogatory eye over what our industry requires from its labour force. The appetite for this sort of scrutiny was surprisingly large, generally filling a lecture theatre with capacity of 400, and generating vigorous discussion both on the night, and later on social media platforms.

The final Symposium 'Labour' continued to reflect on the way architects's work by expanding the discussion on current work practices of our profession to international contexts, and scales. It started by interrogating architecture and labour more broadly in relation to social relations, public policies and means of production. As we know, architecture costs money, and the relationship between architecture and capital is fundamental yet fraught. As neo-liberalizing, market fundamentalist agendas have taken hold of our contemporary cities, the steady commodification of our urban and social fabric extends into all aspects of our daily lives, including the way we work. The ethical dimensions are concerning, revealed in the way in which labour is affected through privatization, deregularization and liberalization. The labour force of construction

workers responsible for erecting a building is often invisible in architectural discourse, yet its arguably one of the more visceral and primary manifestations of the relationship between people, and the buildings they inhabit. Increasingly, in vast construction projects across the globe, armies of construction workers are subjected to conditions akin to slave labour. This raises questions for architects of the extent and agency of our ethical responsibility toward these workers, and an engagement in an understanding of what we, as architects, are asking of them, and also what the human cost is.

This inter-relationship between the neoliberal city, its means of production, and the labour it co-opts and implicates, was introduced through a provoking and scene-setting contribution from Carol Tonetti and Ligia Nobre, from Sao Paulo's *Escola de Cidade*, and collaborative practice *El Gruppo Inteiro*. In 2017, the Escola da Cidade was granted funding from fines imposed by the Ministry of Public Labor Prosecution on a Brazilian construction company, who were convicted of employing workforce based on practices of contemporary slavery when building the Guarulhos International Airport Terminal 3. Tonetti and Nobre described their resulting project, intended to focus public debate on major infrastructure works, migration and labour, including the slave-like work scenarios that exist within the contemporary context of global architecture and the building industry. Tonetti traced the recent context in Brazil – in which 10% of the workforce are construction workers, and where the loosening of labour laws and the growth of 3<sup>rd</sup> party contracts has contributed to a situation, reached in 1995, in which the Federal government acknowledged the existence of slavery. In response to this, and planned over a one-year period the *Contra Condutas (Counter Conducts)* project was intended to raise awareness and produce knowledge concerning work systems by mapping current conducts and protocols in force, and proposing different or 'adjusted conducts' as alternatives to normalized procedures in fields of work. Their questions asked what role can architects have in decreasing the violence of work sites, especially in the situation in which architects no longer enjoy the prerogative of managing the whole project. Through documentary video, and other collated and visualized data analysis, they evidenced the dubious ethical practices involved in 'executive' political built projects in Brazil, as well as ubiquitous 'fast-tracking' construction processes. They also collated documentary evidence on alternative practices like the USINA Collectives, a form of self-managed construction task force, and key in what they call a 'political-pedagogical' project where research has deliberately engaged with analysis and visualizations of found situations, including using art practice and the vocabulary of the construction workforce as tools.

Building this context of enquiry, Adam Kaasa's courageous and provocative 'thought experiment' framed urban gentrification as a hate crime. Unpacking and positioning legal and human rights principles to serve as a hypothetical structure of resistance to urban development illustrated

how the ‘apparatus of visibilities and invisibilities’ can be traced, and understood as a starting point toward a radical re-interpretation of existing systems of power and authority. As a grounded example of this in London, *Concrete Action*, a whistle-blowing platform for built environment professionals, argued that the communication of knowledge to a broader audience should be a core ambition of any urban development project. Established as an anonymous web platform and collective, *Concrete Action* exist in what they term ‘a grey area between ethical responsibility and perceived lack of regard for accepted modes of operation’. Through providing a secure route for the release of privately held information, the platform connects professionals working in the fields of urban design, planning and architecture with community groups, and activists fighting for social housing and public land in London. Their geographical mapping of council estate demolition and regeneration in London is an example of how they collate and visualize information in order to activate and engage residents. They argue that a better communication of the complexity within the invisible processes of urban development, can provide the key to greater community engagement and resistance.

Acting globally, but based in New York, the collective platform *Who Builds Your Architecture? (WBYA?)* represented by Kadambari Baxi and Laura Diamond Dixit, built upon this discussion in the presentation of a thorough and sustained body of research, mapping transnational building projects and migrant labour, again acting as a tool for delivering communication and knowledge. Illustrating that the work of advocacy needs triggers, Baxi explained that *WBYA?* emerged in 2011 out of the action of the ‘Gulf Labour Artists Coalition’ focused on the construction of the New Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi, by Frank Gehry. Realising that no architects were on the list of the petition, the founding members began a process that resulted in the ‘Architects Pledge for Fair Labour’, and interventions in the AIA Codes of Ethics, but which in turn lead to a questioning of how greater ‘effect’ could be leveraged, especially in the light of the shocking hesitancy of architecture practices to engage in ‘digging dirt’ on bigger transnational and ethically dubious projects. The decision to ‘map’ or trace the activities of large transnational construction projects, was seen as a tool for making visible what is normally invisible, a way to bring ‘symmetry’ to what is currently, in their compelling argument, an asymmetrical condition. This initial ‘mapping’ as mechanism, echoes the desires for counter cartographies of resistance in the *Contra Conditas* Project, and for *WBYA?* this has developed in a Field Guide, but also a ‘Graph Commons’ – a database of research which can also host visualizations, of for example, complex networks of key subcontracts like curtain walling; evidence revealing the evasive tactics of transnational construction in avoiding labour laws and other codes of ethical conduct. This deployment of forms of gathering, analysis, and communication – as tools to capture and expose labour violations – was conceived in common amongst contributors as forms of activist practice which brings to

public scrutiny actions normally left hidden. Since the 1990's, against a backdrop of the dismantling of conventional forms of building contract, and the exponential rise in complexity of multinational construction, the oversight or purview across projects has been increasingly veiled and institutions are often complicit. Even Brazil, with its very sophisticated legislation with respect to public participation, has not been able to avoid the violation of labour laws. Against the context of transnational construction labour force revealed, what is of course critical to understand is that architects are also workers. The work that architects do, whether aesthetic, technical, theoretical, social or administrative is a form of labour, yet rarely framed in this way. Architects rarely participate in unions or the organization of worker's rights, and are highly susceptible to exploitation in the workplace, individually by employers, or collectively through competition and procurement systems. Ethical codes for architecture exist in reductive form at a professional level, but even these are often disregarded at a personal level, in the workplace, or in the field of design production.

Bringing the dilemmas of labour to the profession's own doorstep the London-based *Precarious Workers Bureau (PWB)* introduced their provocative and practical publication 'Training for Exploitation'. As an arts and design orientated platform, PWB focus on how institutions are implicated in systemic free labour. PWB's praxis springs from a shared commitment to developing research and actions that are practical, relevant and easily shared and applied. Beginning with a transparent illustration of their employment contract with Central Saint Martins for the contribution to the symposium itself (fortunately for the hosts, fair and ethical) they described the culture of free labour across the arts and architecture, and the need to build solidarities of resistance. Their careful definition of the condition of 'precarity' and its impacts revealed it as a lived experience of intermittent and irregular work, insecurity; subject to constant mobility and migration, and a condition which is 'seeping' into all areas of our contemporary life.

For young designers and architects in the audience, of course, this description of precarity rings sadly true. The journey from trainee to professional, appears to demand the subjugation of all aspects of personal life in favour of enhancing 'employability' through slavish work patterns, amidst a current higher education mantra of employability that is pervasive across the sector too. Shumi Bose delved further by revealing the potential and ironic contradictions for architectural labour in respect to 'expanded' fields of architectural practice – roles of community engagement, policy, governance, research and activism itself – posing the question whether such expanded fields are re-numerated properly, or whether this expanded field is just an opportunity for more work to be undertaken, for less. The fact that the average male architect's salary has increased less than 7% since 1977, against median worker salary increase of 25%, seems to provide evidence that supports her concern. In

an environment in which high profile professionals like Patrik Schumacher (*Zaha Hadid Architects*) argue for the desirability and legitimacy of a culture of cheap internships and long hours, as part and parcel of the normal and competitive nature of practice, the pragmatic case for everyday resistance from PWB was refreshing, and set the tone for the final session.

Peggy Deamer, as both a writer and academic, and founder of *The Architecture Lobby*, provided a forceful and compelling case for architects to identify as workers, providing a background for what it means to be an architect in neoliberal times. Her structured argument, manifesto-like and a core part of the Architecture Lobby's tools for action, provided us with a fundamental re-definition of practice, which she argues should be acknowledged as 'work' not 'art'. The framing of the profession through the provision of 'piece' work (the worst form of labour) sharply conveys the challenges. Understanding that 'creativity is still work', is something that artists have better recognition of than architects. Deamer links this to the broader issues of economy when she states that as architects, we are part of the economy – and until we understand and embrace this we won't be in a position of power or agency. In her view, this agency depends on a closer relationship to the construction industry through contractual engagement, shared risk and shared rewards; a type of 'relational' contract. Complementing this reconstructive mission statement for the profession, Jeremy Till brought a magnifying glass to the notion of labour in architecture through a deep examination of the principles embedded in the architectural competition. Drawing on the inherent exploitative core of the competition as a form of procurement, his critique sets them up as 'dystopias of social process' based entirely on a vacuum approach which renders the design process devoid of any context, and in which anything other than taste and aesthetics is subjugated in favour of the spectacle of the picture – the dreaded presentation boards. Worse, he uses the competition to hold up a sinister mirror demonstrating how the profession actually frames its services through these same principles – in so doing negating the 'real' value of the architect in its fullest and most complex dimension. Concurring with Deamer, Till's argument forcefully demonstrates that the architectural profession readily 'throws away' its architectural knowledge because it doesn't value it, beyond that which resides in the architectural object. Till's call is toward a reconsideration of the value system of the profession, and of driving of change in the economic infrastructures which feed procurement.

What characterized each of these sophisticated and rigorous contributions was a collective engagement with the fundamental networks and forces of architectural labour, in itself both refreshing and urgently required. After delving into the underlying 'apparatus of visibilities and invisibilities' in various building projects – from the deliberate exclusion of full knowledge about economic systems, to the violation of protocols and legal frameworks – the contributors collectively called for a project



of reconstruction within the profession. Most exciting, speakers were often representing organisations and collective platforms agitating for, and driving forms of 'reconstruction' themselves, from *Concrete Action* to *Who Builds Your Architecture?*, from *Precarious Workers Bureau* to *The Architecture Lobby* – and so we were privileged to see a collection of smart (often female) activists, prepared to engage in these complexities with precision, rigour and humour.